

MAT MEMORIES

by John Arezzi

This mat memory will be a little different from the previous columns. Today I won't be talking about a classic wrestling encounter, nor an experience covering wrestling. I am going to share with you my personal memories that I have of Mel Phillips.

Mel Phillips in the middle of the most sickening scandal in the history of professional wrestling. His name has been mentioned in the national media linked and alleged to the most heinous of crimes - child abuse. If Mel is guilty of what has been alleged, he should pay dearly. What I will now inform you of is my own personal experiences with Mel Phillips, someone I have known for eighteen years.

I first met Mel Phillips in June 1974 in Atlanta, Georgia. I was attending my first wrestling convention, promoted by the WFIA (Wrestling Fans International Association), an annual gathering of fans and wrestling professionals to honor each other and talk about the business. I was fortunate enough to be the recipient that two years of awards, the best monthly fan publication, and fan club of the year (both for my work as president of the Fred Blassie Fan Club). That same convention awarded Mel Phillips the honor being "Fan of the Year."

That weekend I became friends with Mel Phillips. He was just breaking into the business as a "ring boy" for the WWWF. His goal was to be a ring announcer.

After the convention I started running into Mel at many of the local shows I attended in New York. A friendship was developing. He was working "inside" the business. Even though a ring boy or gopher wasn't a high position, I respected him because he "knew" all the wrestlers. Many times he provided transportation for the wrestlers, taking them from city to city.

In January of 1975, I ventured to Philadelphia for the first time for the WWWF's TV tapings at the old arena on Market Street. It was here that Mel introduced me to a number of people, mostly girls who dated various wrestlers. I developed some close friendships with those girls, a few of which I still speak to today. Mel would always try to persuade me to go to Hamburg, PA with him. Hamburg was another town where the WWWF would hold TV tapings the day after the Philadelphia tapings. He was always persistent, saying he would pay for the hotel and expenses. I would always politely say no.

Mel began to work more regularly for the WWWF in late 1975-1976, and I still considered him my friend. In fact, during my freshman year of college, Mel would visit me occasionally, and be a guest on my radio show on the campus station. It was during these visits I began to notice a strange habit of Mel's. He would always seek out one of my best friends at school and "wrestle" him. I thought nothing of it at the time.

Mel spent New Year's Eve of 1975 with my family. The day he arrived he proudly showed off a new video tape camera and recorder. Now, this was before video tape cassettes were on the market. This device was a reel to reel recorder, which was rare for any consumer to have. After reading recent allegations in the newspapers, this guy having video equipment back then makes you think.

During the summer of 1976, Mel came to visit me in New York on a handful of occasions. On all these trips he was accompanied by a young boy, who was about 15 years old. I began to question him about this kid. Mel would reply that the youngster was underprivileged, and had a bad home life and

he was looking out for him. On these visits I would often wonder why Mel would always wind up "wrestling" with my neighbors two young boys.

It was also during this summer that I made two trips from Philadelphia to Hamburg with Mel. On both occasions there was only one bed in the hotel room where we stayed. I slept on the floor on both occasions.

My friendship with Mel Phillips began to drift apart in the winter of 1976. I was back in college for my second year, and was going out with Mary Rachele, a young woman from Massachusetts. Mel came up to visit me and felt insulted that I would rather spend my time with Mary than with him. I was getting weird vibes from him and was glad when he left.

From the winter of 1976 through the next few years, I began to notice, more and more, young boys always hanging around with Mel Phillips. It seemed strange to me.

After my pro wrestling "debut" in January of 1978, I began spending less and less time hanging around the business. On the few occasions I would travel to northeast arenas and bump into Mel, it was cordial, not friendly. He was always preoccupied with his group of ring boys that he was now supervising.

My recent experiences with Mel Phillips have not been pleasant. Since my return to the business in 1989 I've heard the stories and been repulsed by them. On the few occasions I actually have spoken to him, the first thing he would ask me is "How are the Stenifords?" The Stenifords were the two young boys who lived next door to me sixteen years ago.

Perhaps I should feel grateful. I spent a lot of time with Mel Phillips in the 1970's, and thank God, I was not put in a position which would have embarrassed me and would have put his life in jeopardy. Today I shudder when I think about it. I just hope he seeks some professional help.

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